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ABSTRACT

As a result of public pressure to assess student learning, college administrators are becoming more insistent in their demands that faculty members become involved in learning outcomes assessment. Most faculty members, however, think of assessment as another name for standardized testing--a procedure with little to do with the critical thinking and writing skills that they most value. Additionally, most college faculty feel "cut off from" the subject of assessment because they view assessment as something that does not "reflect the values important to an understanding of how people learn to read and write" (Huot, 1996). But if college faculty are given the opportunity to control the assessment process and shape it to reflect local concerns, such a process can be a "transformative experience" that allows faculty, especially those in English, to explain to themselves and others how and why humanistic values are such an important part of their students' education. This paper argues that, by conceiving of assessment as a process of gathering information, faculty members are able to view assessment as research, something they are comfortable with. The paper demonstrates, by considering the work of two faculty committees, that writing process heuristics can be used to help faculty members develop this procedural knowledge and meet their assessment goals. It relates how writing heuristics guided the work of these two committees. The paper first discusses methods used to help the "English 100" committee (mostly part-time teachers) develop portfolio assessment rubrics and then discusses the ways the "English Major" committee was helped to develop an entire assessment plan. (NKA)

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Rhetoric and Change: Using Writing Heuristics to Help English Faculty Accept and Use the 'A' Word (Assessment)

Learning outcomes assessment is perhaps one of the biggest institutional buzzwords of the last decade. Accreditation bodies and state and federal governments have embraced assessment as a means of insuring educational quality and accountability. As a result of this public pressure to assess student learning, college administrators at all levels are becoming more insistent in their demands that faculty members become involved in learning outcomes assessment. However, college faculty, especially those in the humanities, are dubious, and rightfully so, about assessment improving the quality of education. Most faculty members think of assessment as another name for standardized testing – a procedure that has little to do with the critical thinking and writing skills that they most value. As Brian Huot in "Toward a New Theory of Writing Assessment" puts it most college faculty feel "cut off from" the subject of assessment because they view assessment as something that does not "reflect the values important to an understanding of how people learn to read and write" (549).

However, assessment does not have to be an alienating process for faculty members. In fact, if college faculty are given the opportunity to control the assessment process and shape it to reflect local concerns, such a process can in fact be a "transformative experience" that allows faculty, especially those in English, to explain to

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themselves and others how and why humanistic values are such an important part of their students' educations (Henning 3). James Slevin argues in "Engaging Intellectual Work: The Faculty's Role in Assessment," that assessment can be engaging for faculty members if it can be characterized as intellectual work involving "a commitment to critical inquiry, collegiality, careful review, and serious study" (299). Assessment can easily be construed as intellectual work if it is flexibly defined as a "process of gathering information" about how well a particular institution, program, or course is "achieving what it purports to do" (Asteriadis).

By conceiving of assessment as a process of gathering information, faculty members are able to view assessment as research, which is something most faculty members are comfortable with. However, changing faculty perceptions about assessment, while a good initial step, will not help faculty stay comfortable with and engaged in the assessment process. Faculty members will only stay engaged in the assessment process if they are equipped with procedural or "how-to" knowledge that helps them stay in control of the process by letting them discover what to do. As this paper will demonstrate by considering the work of two faculty committees, writing process heuristics can be used to help faculty members develop this procedural knowledge and meet their assessment goals.

Before discussing how writing heuristics guided the work of these two committees, I first need to introduce you to the committee members and their assessment concerns. The first committee, which I will refer to as the English 100 committee, was made up of mostly part-time teachers who regularly teach English 100, my institution's developmental writing course. These teachers were motivated to participate in

assessment as a result of a mandatory portfolio requirement in English 100. This requirement stipulates that to pass English 100 students must submit a portfolio of at least two out of class and one in class essays for review by other English 100 teachers at an end of semester portfolio reading. The teachers read the portfolios to determine if they pass or fail.

The problem for the committee was that this policy did not offer guidelines for distinguishing passing portfolios from non-passing portfolios. As a result, the end of the semester portfolio reading was becoming unmanageable with each teacher offering a different defense as to why all his or her students' portfolios should pass. Consequently, all portfolios passed at the portfolio reading, but most teachers felt uncomfortable with the fact that the portfolios passed for different reasons. The teachers realized that students were not leaving English 100 with the same set of basic skills. To solve this problem, these teachers decided they were interested in creating a set of assessment rubrics to use at future portfolio readings.

In contrast to the first committee's well-focused assessment project and fairly homogeneous membership, the second committee, which I will refer to as the English Major committee, had a less well-focused assessment goal and a more heterogeneous membership. This committee was made up of full-time faculty members in English representing a variety of sub-disciplines including linguistics, literature, and composition. This group was brought together by virtue of an upcoming accreditation visit and had been asked by their institution to come up with an assessment plan.

Members of this committee had attended a campus-wide workshop on assessment which had provided them with a definition of assessment and an explanation of

assessment's importance, but they had not been given guidance on **how** to develop an assessment plan. In many ways, this committee was being asked to start from scratch. It would eventually need to develop learning goals and objectives as well as a means of measuring these goals and objectives.

Now that the committees have been introduced, this paper will consider how both of these committees successfully engaged in the assessment process by relying on writing heuristics. In many ways, a productive assessment process is similar to a productive writing process. Both processes can be recursive, and participants in either process find it useful to (1) pre-write to generate ideas, (2) to draft to select ideas for use, and (3) to revise to shape the selected ideas into a final form. Keeping these three basic stages in mind, I will detail how each committee used writing heuristics to meet their assessment goals.

To help the English 100 committee develop portfolio assessment rubrics, I held a two-hour meeting where I asked each member including myself to free-write for ten-minutes in response to this prompt: What are the minimum characteristics an essay must possess for it to be deemed passing in English 100? Once the committee members had used pre-writing to generate ideas, I then asked them to select from their free-writes the 10 most important features an essay must possess and to rank order that list. Free-writing and selective listing helped the committee members prepare for producing a collaborative draft of assessment rubrics.

To generate the first draft, I asked each committee member to share, one-at-a-time, the first three items on their top ten lists. I recorded each person's answers on a white board. When duplicate responses were offered, I did not record them, but asked the

group to choose which response they wanted me to record. Once the white board list was complete, I asked the committee if there was anything in their free-writes that was not on the board. Surprisingly, the list only missed a couple of significant ideas: one concerning audience and one concerning tone. These items were added to the white board list. I then asked the committee to group items on the list into the rhetorical categories of writing process, idea development, organization, writing context, and use of language. Thus, the committee created a white board draft of assessment rubrics, which I later wrote up and distributed to each member via email.

At the committee's next two-hour meeting, the faculty methodically considered the previously created draft by taking up each rubric, one-at-a-time, and revising it to make it more concrete. The committee's major concern throughout revision was to make sure that each rubric was specific enough so that it could be easily measured at a portfolio reading – a characteristic you will notice when considering the rubric handout. By the end of the meeting, the committee completed a final draft of the rubrics that all teachers could accept. As the CCCC's position statement on writing assessment recommends, these rubrics were published and shared with students the following semester vis a vis my institution's composition program packet. Only after these rubrics were published and communicated to students were they applied at portfolio readings.

Instructors now use these rubrics all semester long to guide student revision and to assess their drafts in progress. As a result, at the end of the semester, the committee passes most English 100 portfolios, but the committee has found that the portfolios that do pass at the reading are of a higher quality than portfolios that have passed in previous semesters. So, not only does the committee have a shared sense of appropriate English

100 requirements, but by clearing articulating those requirements to their students, the students' writing has improved.

For the English 100 committee, the movement from pre-writing to final draft happened quickly – in just two two-hour meetings. This quick movement can probably be attributed to the fact that members of this committee have had a good deal of experience reading and assessing the work of English 100 students. They simply needed to make the rubrics they were using more explicit and concrete. However, I should also note that even though the final draft is now complete and has been in use for nearly three semesters, English 100 teachers are interested in completing more revisions to the rubrics to account for current curriculum trends. The committee takes seriously the CCCC's position statement mandate that assessment should be "authentic" and measure and support "what is taught in the classroom." As a result, the committee hopes to add a rubric about thesis and perhaps a rubric about the use of outside sources in the near future.

In contrast to the English 100 committee's quick movement from pre-writing to final published draft, the English Major committee which needed to develop an entire assessment plan, required two semesters worth of meetings to establish learning goals and objectives and a means for measuring those goals and objectives. Also, because of other department concerns such as academic autonomy and strategic planning, the English department has yet to implement its assessment plan which is something the English 100 teachers have been doing for the last three semesters.

The English Major committee devoted one semester to creating learning goals and objectives for the English major. This committee was not able to spend a lot of time at its

first meeting completing pre-writing on this matter, so I assigned the group homework. For homework, I gave each committee member a copy of learning goals and objectives for an English major at another institution. I asked each member to use this model to guide them in generating their own set of goals and objectives.

At the next committee meeting, each faculty member contributed to the pre-writing stage of idea generation by sharing his or her homework. During the sharing, the committee decided they also needed to clarify the concepts "learning goal" and "learning objective." The committee decided it would use the term "learning goal" to refer to a general pedagogical concept and the term "learning objective" to refer to the specific instantiation of that goal in the classroom. This distinction can be seen in the final draft of this document, which I have provided you with.

Armed with this distinction, faculty members left the meeting to adjust their lists and to email them to one another. At the following meeting the committee began selecting material for their document draft. One faculty member facilitated this process by use of a cut and tape method to synthesize the members' ideas. The committee was then able to work with a cut and tape version of everyone's brainstorming lists and remove repetitive ideas and re-word ideas. By the end of the meeting, the committee had produced a rough draft of learning goals and objectives, which was later typed and emailed to all committee members. The English Major committee used two more meetings to refine this draft into the final document you see before you today. They used revision to insure that the learning goals and objectives were comprehensive enough to account for the variety of courses in the English major.

Once the semester long work entailed in creating learning goals and objectives was completed, the committee then needed to create an assessment tool or tools for measuring these goals and objectives. The need to create assessment tools is another way this committee differed significantly from the English 100 committee. The English 100 committee was already under a mandate to use a writing portfolio as an assessment tool. They simply needed to clarify what rubrics or learning goal and objectives that tool should measure. The full-time English faculty, on the other hand, had the tough task of creating assessment tools, which was something that nearly none of us was familiar with or comfortable with.

To help the committee generate ideas for an assessment tool, I initially did not use a writing heuristic but instead followed the assessment form our department was required to complete for accreditation. The form asked faculty members to match each learning objective to the specific English major course or set of courses that was related to that objective. Once that process was completed, the faculty needed to explain how that specific objective would be assessed or measured in that specific course or those specific courses.

The faculty members dutifully completed this homework individually and shared their results at the next meeting. However, as they began to discuss each other's work, they began arguing about whether or not a specific objective could be applied to a course they were teaching. While this discussion started out as a productive one, the longer the discussion continued the more entrenched each faculty member became in his or her own sub-discipline. What I now realize is I had assigned the faculty members the wrong homework. Since up until this meeting the faculty had taken a comprehensive view of

the major, it made little sense to now divide the major into courses. At the next meeting, I assigned a different kind of pre-writing that would take into account this comprehensive perspective.

To help the committees begin to generate ideas or pre-write for an assessment tool or tools, I asked each committee member for homework to respond to a version of the five journalistic questions that I had revised to correspond only to assessment issues. Committee members were asked to describe **what** assessment tool they would use to measure **what** learning goals and objectives, **how** the tool would be used to gather this data, **who** would need to participate in the tool's use, **where** the tool would fit into the English major courses, **when** the tool would be used, and **why** the tool would be a good one to use.

At the next meeting, committee members shared their results, and the desirable components of each tool were recorded on a white board. Through this selecting or drafting process, the committee came to the realization that it had a preference for the use of two tools: a student survey and a portfolio of student work. The committee then decided to divide into two sub-committees each of which would be responsible for producing a final draft of one of the preferred tools. By the end of the semester, each sub-committee did produce a final draft of an assessment tool that was tentatively accepted by the English department.

As I noted before, institutional pressure to complete other projects has prevented the English department from implementing its assessment plan, but its learning goals, objectives, and selected assessment tools have been published at the institutional level via the department's contribution to the university's accreditation document and via the

department's academic autonomy proposal. Also, the department has established a curriculum and assessment committee that will eventually implement these assessment procedures. However, since this process is incomplete neither the learning goals and objectives nor the assessment measures have been shared with the department's English majors.

All in all, the English Major committee's assessment process took longer that the English 100 committee's process and was more recursive. Essentially, the English Major committee went through the assessment process twice: once to create learning goals and objectives and once to create assessment tools. Despite the fact that the English Major committee has not finished its assessment tools, its journey through this process has been as transformative as the one the English 100 committee experienced. The full-time English faculty, even though they have different disciplinary perspectives, now have a better sense of what their colleagues do and how that work is related to what they each do. This new knowledge has helped strengthen the atmosphere of collegiality in my department.

This paper has attempted to demonstrate that both full- and part-time faculty members can find assessment to be an engaging and transformative process if they are allowed to control that process so that it responds to local needs and concerns. However, since most faculty members feel alienated by the prospect of participating in an assessment process, they must be provided with procedural or "how to" knowledge if they are to remain engaged in the process. By conceiving of assessment as a process of gathering information that is similar to the writing process, and by using writing process

heuristics, faculty members can successfully meet their assessment goals in a congenial and intellectually satisfying manner.

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Handout for:
Rhetoric and Change: Using Writing Heuristics to Help English Faculty Accept and Use the 'A' Word (Assessment)

ENGL 100 Portfolio Assessment Rubrics

To receive a passing grade, a final portfolio must at **minimum** demonstrate an understanding of the following rhetorical concepts:

1. Writing process

a. final drafts in the portfolio should demonstrate some evidence of revision
b. final drafts in the portfolio should demonstrate some evidence of editing
c. some prewriting should have be used in the creation of final drafts

2. Idea development

a. final drafts should meet the minimum word count as required by the assignment or the instructor
b. detail use in final drafts should support the papers' topic sentences and thesis statements
c. at least 2/3 of the body paragraphs of each paper should make use of concrete details

3. Organization

a. final drafts should demonstrate an understanding of basic essay structure through their use of a beginning, middle, and end
b. final drafts should reflect an understanding of basic paragraph structure through the use of topic sentences
c. final drafts should use a pattern of organization that is loosely directed by each paper's thesis

4. Writing context

a. detail use in final drafts should be directed by each paper's assigned purpose and selected audience
b. each final draft's pattern of organization should be directed by the paper's assigned purpose
c. the tone (use of style) of each final draft should be appropriate for the paper's assigned purpose and selected audience

5. Use of language

a. final drafts should reflect evidence of syntactic fluency via the use of compound and some complex sentences
b. problems in word usage, mechanics, and grammar should be controlled to the extent that they do not hinder the meaning of each final draft

Source: Purdue North Central Composition Program. *Purdue North Central Program Packet for Composition Students*. Purdue North Central: Westville, IN, 2001.

Purdue North Central English Major Learning Goals and Objectives (Sections II and III of the Program Assessment Document)

II. PROGRAM GOALS (INCLUDING CAMPUS WIDE GENERAL EDUACTION GOALS):

1. Majors in English should be familiar with different critical apparatuses (e.g. theoretical, historical, genre related etc.).
2. Majors in English should understand the ethical and political responsibilities that come with textual power.
3. Majors in English should be familiar with the historical changes within the development of the English language.
4. Majors in English should be familiar with British, American, ethnic, and other world literatures from various historical periods.
5. Majors in English should have a critical understanding of rhetoric when crafting a text.
6. Majors in English should have an ability to conduct research in a critical and analytical manner.

III. PROGRAM OBJECTIVES FOR STUDENT ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT (INCLUDING CAMPUS WIDE GENERAL EDUCATION GOALS):

1a. Students should understand, distinguish, and write about various literary genres including the essay, the novel, drama, the short story, poetry, and film.
1b. Students should read texts for subtextual as well as surface meanings.
1c. Students should apply critical and theoretical methods of analysis to interpret and write about printed, electronic, and performed texts.
1d. Students should write a plausible critical analysis of a text.
1e. Students should read their own papers analytically and critically.
2a. Students should evaluate the moral/political significance of texts as social acts.
2b. Students should evaluate the moral/political significance of their own textual performances.
3a. Students should trace key changes in the development of the English language.
3b. Students should apply linguistic theories to the analysis of various texts.
4a. Students can engage with and articulate the meanings of texts produced during various historical periods.
4b. Students can engage with and articulate the meanings of texts produced in various geographical areas.
4c. Students can engage with and articulate the meanings of texts produced within various cultural contexts.
5a. Students should demonstrate a consideration for audience and purpose in their writing.
5b. Students should demonstrate an ethical sensitivity to language, including its inflammatory and persuasive aspects.
5c. Students should demonstrate a critical understanding of rhetorical principles when using computer technology.
6a. Student should produce researched papers that use appropriate, credible, and reliable source material in support of a thesis.
6b. Students should conduct primary and secondary research appropriate to their field of study.
6c. Students should conduct research using both print-based and electronic tools.

Source: Letters and Languages Section. English Department. "Program Assessment Profile," Purdue University North Central, Westville, IN. 18 December 2000.

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